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ABSTRACT

An experiential course in administrative practice was designed at the University of Maine to address public and professional demands for competency-centered preparation courses. The course employs a predesigned case study replicating a school setting to move students beyond theory and into the interpersonal relationships and personal dimensions of school leadership practices. The underlying conceptual framework that guided course development is presented in three sections: (1) a description of the laboratory course design and structure; (2) discussion of the conceptual model underlying the design and the manner in which course leaders employed it in the analytic phases of the course; and (3) depictions of a cross-section of student and faculty evaluations of the course. Examples of feedback from students identify the perceptions and reactions of students to the new course format and content. (5 references) (SI)

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Preparing School Administrators

on Reform

Integrating Knowledge in
Educational Administration:
Moving Beyond Content

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**NOTES
ON
REFORM**

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**Integrating Knowledge in
Educational Administration:
Moving Beyond Content**

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NOTES ON REFORM

Notes on Reform is a publication of the National Policy Board for Educational Administration. The purpose of this series is to disseminate information about programs, projects, ideas, or issues related to the improvement of preparation programs for school administrators. Program descriptions, project evaluations, strategies for improvement, research reports, policy proposals, think pieces -- or any other form of information about innovations or proposed program improvements in educational administration -- could be a source of ideas for others interested in reforming our field. Requests should be forwarded to staff headquarters for the National Policy Board: University of Virginia, Curry School of Education, 405 Emmet Street, Charlottesville, VA 22903, attention Terry A. Astuto or Linda C. Winner (Co-Editors), or Deborah A. Polen (Assistant Editor), (804-924-0583).

**Integrating Knowledge in
Educational Administration:
Moving Beyond Content**

This paper describes the development and implementation of an experiential course in administrative practice designed, in part, to address public and professional demands for competency-centered preparation courses. The course employs a predesigned case study replicating a school setting to move students beyond theory and into the interpersonal relationships and personal dimensions of school leadership practices. The underlying conceptual framework that guided course development is presented. Examples of feedback from students identify the perceptions and reactions of students to the new course format and content.

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INTEGRATING KNOWLEDGE IN EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION: MOVING BEYOND CONTENT

Professors of educational administration at the University of Maine (Orono) have been engaged in a two-year effort to create a laboratory course for administrator skill development. Two forces propelled the development of this course: (1) a state level initiative to reform administrator certification, and (2) a core of faculty at the University of Maine intent on making graduate coursework more consonant with administrator development. The state initiative emerged over several years in the form of a law requiring all administrator certification to be competency based. Prompted by the perceived failure of the old method of credit-based re-certification, the Maine State Board of Education and legislators designed a system of certification renewal based on demonstrated background and knowledge in twelve areas such as supervision, leadership, and organizational theory.

Simultaneously, several faculty at the University of Maine were developing a model for administrator training that would: (1) place practicing and prospective administrators in true-to-life administrative situations and enable them to create strategies for handling those challenges; and (2) provide ample opportunity for students to reflect on their activities and their thinking in order to assess their current or future professional competency. Underlying these purposes was the broad goal of providing students with a structured opportunity to integrate their knowledge, acquired competencies, and professional experiences in a way that would enhance the transfer of knowledge to action in real work settings.

This course development effort is reported here in three sections: (1) a description of the laboratory course design and structure; (2) discussion of the conceptual model underlying the design and the manner in which course leaders

employed it in the analytic phases of the course; and (3) depictions of a cross-section of student and faculty evaluations of the course.

LABORATORY COURSE DESIGN

Four principles guided the course design. First, the students were placed in a simulated "real school district" context and asked to assimilate considerable information about it in order to make decisions congruent with forces at large in the district. Second, students were organized in teams to handle jointly a series of episodes in the life of the district that unfold over the life of the course. Third, individuals were required to role play a wide variety of simulated characters, some administrators and some not, who populated these unfolding episodes. Fourth, frequent opportunity was provided for students to give and receive feedback, to reflect on strategies planned and actions taken, and to design and reformulate new administrative actions for the next step in the episode.

Three faculty members have led the course -- once as a threesome, once as a pair, and once alone. In each case, the enrollment was between 10 and 16. The course was offered twice during the Summer session, meeting in half day or all day sessions over a standard three-week period. When led by a single instructor, it was offered over a sixteen-week span and met either in three or four hour sessions or, in three cases, all day on Saturday.

At the outset of the course, participants are introduced to a simulated school district (Maine School Administrative District #100). They receive thick notebooks detailing (1) the district's context, including history, geography, political and socio-economic character, personnel roster, negotiated contract, and budgets; and (2) the context of the new Cashwell Middle School, including its history and personnel, student and faculty handbooks, last year's student achievement scores, data from a

recent school climate survey, and other information. The district and the middle school have been simulated to recreate conditions typical of districts in Maine in the late 1980s (e.g., inter-town disagreements played out on the SAD #100 board; Cashwell is a junior high in transition to being a middle school and has pockets of resistant faculty). Students are expected to learn the context thoroughly at the outset of the course and to act within its real limits throughout the simulation.

Students are then grouped into two or three teams of five to eight people. Each team is introduced to an episode in the district's life describing a problem, the positions of prominent individuals regarding the problem, and other information (some of it extraneous). The episode begins and is propelled forward by a series of events created by the instructors that call on various administrators to act. Most often, the simulation has centered on the Cashwell Middle School principal and vice principal, but the superintendent has had a large role as well. Each team prepares a strategy and supporting materials for the principal as s/he enters the role playing event. Members of other teams play the characters with whom the principal must deal (superintendent, board members, teachers, other principals, parents and students). Each team plays through its strategy in front of the others, and all students get to be administrators, other players, or observers in almost every session. Each episode moves forward and sometimes backward according to the manner in which its various meetings are handled by the principal. Each new event is created to match the resolution of the event that precedes it.

The three episodes used in the course to date have focused on three different types of administrative problems. The first involved a school board demand that the Cashwell principal explain the poor performance of the school on the recent state achievement tests -- raising issues of goal clarity, equity, teacher supervision, curricular integrity, and test interpretation. In the second episode, the principal

must develop a plan for teacher involvement in the professional development of teachers in which the principal grapples with teacher empowerment, shared decision-making, faculty morale, and union-management relationships. The third episode focused on several student-athletes and their impending ineligibility for basketball tournaments, engaging the principal in a series of teacher-parent-student triangles, debates between achievement and self-esteem goals, fair treatment vs. adherence to policy, and a number of other sticky issues. In their approach to the events of each episode, students formulate a plan by reviewing applicable research, the social environment, interpersonal and political factors that have arisen in previous meetings, and relevant theories of organizational behavior and administration. The latter are provided in readings that the entire group discusses before or after a series of role plays.

The analysis of these events and the actions taken by the students provide the important opportunity to integrate lessons about leadership. Each role play is (1) witnessed by everyone, (2) formally observed by some students using structured formats, and (3) videotaped. Everyone uses the data to analyze the decisions and actions of each simulated principal. Because each role play occurs more than once (involving each team as administrator), the group can compare at least two approaches to a given situation, reminding everyone of the idiosyncratic nature of administrative work. Analysis employs the three dimensional framework discussed in the next section and always concludes with all students, whether or not they played an administrator in the current event, focusing on their own self-assessment. Each student develops a dialogue with himself or herself concerning the nature of school leadership and their fitness and preparedness for it.

CONCEPTUAL STRUCTURE

Two fundamental premises shaped the way the instructors created the episodal events and structured the reflective portions of the course. The first emerges from our growing understanding of how adults learn, the second from our own model for understanding the work of the school administrator.

We believe that administrators will maximize the integration of professional knowledge with action if given the chance to repeatedly follow a learning cycle that links problem analysis to planning to action to reflection. Considerable evidence supports this belief (Cross, 1981; Schon, 1983; Cooper, 1988). The work of Paula Silver, The Silver Center, and Sarah Levine (1989) explains the rationale for such a process and depicts it in use in field settings. In our laboratory course, we want not only to teach our students the use of the cycle, but also to make them conscious of it so that it might become a permanent part of their work as administrators.

A three dimensional framework provides a basis for understanding the work of school administrators. The framework underscores the fact that every administrative leadership event has a substantive dimension, an interpersonal dimension, and a personal dimension. In considering and taking action, school leaders constantly mix their knowledge of educational issues (substantive) with their knowledge of the people with whom they work (interpersonal) with their knowledge about themselves (personal). We are most familiar with the first two dimensions, as they approximate common models of leadership. It is in the addition of the personal dimension that students discover a means to integrate their knowledge of workplace factors with their knowledge of themselves in order to plan actions accurately. In brief, we sought to teach our students the three dimensions and,

most importantly, that in considering action, taking action, and reflecting on action it pays to consider all three.

These two premises guided our work with student. As we presented each new twist in an episode, we structured time and activities to reinforce the learning cycle. Typically, a three or four hour block of time began with a handout announcing events that had occurred since the previous class and raising new challenges for our characters. Teams designed around the key administrative roles (usually the Casnwell principal or assistant principal) would then meet to examine the new information and develop tactics and strategies for action. The action would take place followed by structured group analysis. At the end of a session, students would be asked to reflect on what had occurred either through structured written assignments or through personal journal entries.

The three dimensional framework is applied to each stage of the learning cycle. For example, in the first episode students are asked by the superintendent to develop a report for the school board on recent achievement scores, including a plan to improve them next year. As students begin to grapple with substantive matters dealing with reading and understanding a printout of their school's achievement scores, we force them simultaneously to ponder the interpersonal issues and options that are inseparable from administrators' consideration of solutions to the substantive problem, i.e., improving student performance. Hence, they must sort their substantive options according to how likely it is that each will "play well" with the individuals involved (board, superintendent, faculty) and with the principal's options for interpersonal tactics and strategies. Finally, mulling over alternative program and interpersonal strategies boils down to a final question -- "Can I pull it off?" In the personal dimension, we ask students to assess what skills, knowledge, and temperament a leader might need to execute successfully the

substantive and interpersonal strategies their group is considering. Then, as one student prepares to take action, the question becomes more personalized -- "Do I have these skills, this knowledge, this temperament?"

The action phase is recorded in a number of ways. Most often, we videotape the role play to provide the best record. But we also employ a variety of observation instruments that students who are not involved in the role play can use. By structuring these to focus on one of the three dimensions, it is possible to collect data concurrently on all three. For example, one person will be asked to chart the flow of facts, ideas, and proposed decisions through the sessions; another will chart the participation and alliance-building interactions; a third observer will focus wholly on the administrator and her or his behaviors and verbal involvement. As the course progresses, observers can frequently begin charting more than one dimension at the same time.

The data collected in the action phase become the focus of the reflection phase. Here, the whole group, each team, and each individual are asked to use the data as well as their own recollections to assess the simulated activity. Once again, we stress the importance of examining all three dimensions, since we have found that students often dwell heavily on the interpersonal, to the exclusion of the other two. Specifically, students are asked to evaluate how substantive knowledge about the issues at hand was used in, for example, a meeting; then they are asked to examine how the relationships among the players at the meeting affected events and outcomes; and, finally, they are asked to consider their participation and what impact that participation had on the course of the meeting.

An important part of the reflection process is the continuing personal analysis each participant undertakes. Students examine their own reactions to the role play by recording them in individual journals and/or through structured assignments.

Typically, they explore the alternatives that the administrator had available at critical junctures in the role play. For example, when the angry parent during an office meeting with the principal accused the teacher of neglecting her child, what possible actions could the principal have taken? Following consideration of alternatives, students select the best one for them had they been the administrator. Most importantly, students are asked to justify their thinking based on substantive reasoning (what makes best educational sense), interpersonal reasoning (what makes best sense to the individuals involved, both logically and emotionally), and personal reasoning (what would I be best able to succeed at doing).

FEEDBACK

In order to gauge the effectiveness of the course, the instructors gathered feedback from students each time the course was offered. The vast majority of students believed this class was a worthwhile experience; others felt uncomfortable with the way it was designed. To communicate a sense of the students' reactions, their comments were clustered according to the substantive, interpersonal, and personal dimensions that provided the structure for the course experience.

Substantive Dimension

Certain skills and knowledge areas were built into the simulations, although we found that the simulations developed lives of their own in this respect. Substantively, students were presented with three major problems: raising achievement scores and the public fallout of low scores; engaging faculty in a top-down policy to design a collegial support system for the improvement of teaching; and intervening in a case of academic ineligibility for athletic participation. Comments from students regarding the practicality of the course were overwhelmingly positive; students did not, however, readily identify the substantive or content contribution of the course:

Excellent course -- exceptionally practical and relevant. Should be a course requirement for administrators. It gives useful skills in dealing with volatile issues and potentially damaging situations.

The opportunity provided to apply theory in a hands-on, practical manner.

Combines theory and practice. Beats the old lecture theory seven days of the week.

An effective means through which to complement theory and bring theoretical concepts to life. Also, a realistic picture of what educational administration entails.

Very true as to what administrators face in their daily work. Gave me information on how to face the real situations.

The general feeling that this course combined theory and practice stemmed from the use of a case study; the course design was a unique experience for most students. Virtually all the students thought the case study materials were orderly, complete, and realistic.

The reality of the situations set up for role playing in class; it is good they were designed to convey the reality that there are no clear cut, easy answers.

Gives a realistic picture of the role of an educational administrator. Gives an opportunity to learn valuable lessons from those already in the administrative field.

Simulated experiences involving issues gave realistic situations to act, react, and analyze.

Very realistic. This is what we deal with in our jobs.

Over and over again the course content and format were acknowledged for their intensity and realism. One student best expressed this by referring to this course as "The Reality Slap."

The success of the role plays, however, tended to make them the dominant focus of the course, often at the cost of content. As mentioned earlier, students were given daily reading assignments from various educational journals to enrich their knowledge base on the topic of the day. For example, for the role play in

which the principal was introducing the concept of peer support teams to the faculty, students were assigned to read "Everyday Acts! How Principals Influence Development of Their Staffs" (McEvoy, 1987). Although students believed the readings were valuable, they also believed more time should have been devoted to them in order to discuss how they related to the class lesson.

I enjoyed most of the readings. They are needed to give insight and provide focus.

Contained sufficient information on topics that could be problem areas in your own school.

I would have liked a little more structured integration of the readings.

I think simulations have their place in nearly any course offering but should not be the entire focus of the course. I am concerned about the course being "content light" - maybe focusing on only one or two issues rather than three during the three-week period would allow for more in-depth study of a problem and bring it to more of a resolution.

The role playing exercises were generally perceived as realistic, easy to relate to, and helpful. As expected, they were not perceived as being comfortable, and some were characterized as "distressful."

The role plays in themselves were realistic. However, some of the participants really went overboard. However, it did make us aware to be ready for anything!

I found it hard to believe that things were in such a mess in so many areas. However, for the sake of the class, I can see why it was necessary [to structure the episodes this way].

I thought the role plays were realistic. The last week's materials, though, seemed particularly skewed to the negative in terms of issues for the Assistant Principal to deal with and this made the role plays less comfortable than they had been the two previous weeks. That might have been an issue of firing or conflict, though.

Interestingly, experienced administrators did not feel the simulations were unrealistically stressful as often as did pre-service students.

Interpersonal Dimension

As the students began to deal head-on with substantive matters, they found that the interpersonal dimension of their roles as administrators was inseparable from their consideration of solutions. Interpersonal themes included team problem-solving, leading meetings, redirecting people in conflict, motivating of staff, engaging others in the change process, and developing of consensus. When students were asked to list the course's two greatest strengths, the comment that came up repeatedly was "the students being able to interact with each other." This interaction with their colleagues in the course was essential to their learning about the interpersonal dimensions of the role plays. It was an opportunity to learn from the other players how they felt and why they acted and reacted in the event as they did:

It was an opportunity to try out new ways of interacting, an opportunity to get feedback from peers on your ideas, judgments about how things should be handled, rather than from superiors.

Allowed opportunity to try ideas with other administrators and exchange ideas.

An opportunity to weave interpersonal and personal levels into the substantive level. Time to share experiences with each other -- time to collaborate.

It gave you the opportunity to see how the other side feels.

It provided an insight into how others think and how they view me.

These opportunities evolved from the working relationships that developed over the period of the course. Students enjoyed the involvement and participation of everyone.

Great experience working with a group.

Extremely useful to see the different perceptions of the same situation by different people.

Personal Dimension

The third dimension separates this course from most other educational administration offerings. Students were asked to assess what personal skills, knowledge, and temperament they might need in order to deal with the substantive and interpersonal issues they faced in each daily event. Students' self assessments often centered on their ability to speak clearly and logically, to consult effectively, to understand complex issues and relationships, to be honest and personally affirming of others, to draw on a philosophical and theoretical base to provide consistent leadership, and to handle the personal stresses of dealing with conflict. Regarding their personal reflections, students had this to say:

Exciting and terrifying at the same time!

Keeps you on your toes.

I explored issues that were new to me, or I got a different slant on old issues.

It forced me to take risks.

The personal dimension forced students to reflect critically on their own ability to carry out certain administrative tasks. And as evidenced from the following comments, it was not easy:

The role plays were useful but I felt much stress if I was a major player. The issues were real, to the point where I have experienced some; however, I felt like no matter what I said or did, I would be attacked.

Yes, the role plays were roles. Sometimes easy to relate to, sometimes not. No -- not always comfortable.

At times, I found the situations uncomfortable. However, if they are to be realistic, they must be that way.

Most important to us were students' perceptions of the importance of this personal dimension and its direct bearing on their thinking about administrative careers:

Even after four years as an administrator, I can still recall the sense of being overwhelmed with the responsibilities of the job. I wish I'd had a chance to take a course like this before I became an administrator so I wouldn't have walked into the job as blindly as I did. Those first six months on the job might not have been so difficult -- I thought I had moved into the twilight zone!

Gives you some hands-on experience for new administrators. Gives other administrators a chance to analyze how they handled a situation - strengths and/or weaknesses.

The role plays were a concern only because of my own personality. I felt it was extremely important for me to learn how to deal with these types of situations. I learned a great deal from the whole group and process.

[This has led me to consider] possibly a career change!

A number of methods were used to create an environment which promoted student reflection. Students were asked to keep a daily journal, classes were videotaped, and the class was taught by a team of professors. These each evoked comment from students. For many students, writing a reflective journal was a new venture. Most students felt the journal was a useful tool in this respect.

The journal helped me understand events better and allowed me to relate the course to myself.

I would have welcomed a little more "endedness" in journaling. I expended lots of energy on the journal assignment trying to relate it to readings and had little left for personal connections.

Videotaping offered a unique opportunity to view one's personal side. Students were allowed to take the videotapes and review them on their own. In the first few class sessions, students felt a little uncomfortable being videotaped. However, it did not take long for them to ignore the camera and slip into their own modes of behavior. Practically every night each set of videotapes was taken home by students as they voluntarily used them as a basis for journal reflection. As one student reported, "videotaping provided a dramatic and positive dimension that permitted this course to be personalized."

Finally, students made a number of comments regarding the team teaching method. As mentioned earlier, two and sometimes three professors were involved in the teaching process. This procedure was both very rewarding and extremely demanding. Although team teaching was labor intensive for us, it was appreciated by the students.

By both instructors commenting, I found two viewpoints very useful. Their questions posed to my answers were especially helpful.

Team teaching concept offered two viewpoints/perceptions and a better teacher/student ratio.

Interaction of the two instructors was thought-provoking.

I really enjoyed the interaction between instructors - two heads are better than one.

If there was one weakness of this class, it had to be time. The class was taught in two ways, as a three-week summer session course and as a fifteen-week regular semester course. In both instances, students expressed concern about the lack of time.

We needed more time to talk about some of the articles.

Not enough time to really play out situations to their natural conclusions. I wish we could have had more time to talk about gender issues.

Not enough time to fully explore some topics which arise.

Time between sessions was not adequate to pull together reflections and plans for the next class.

The time frame was a problem in the fourteen week version of the course; when classes were weeks apart it was difficult to keep up the interest and momentum.

Finally, nearly every student affirmed the idea that graduate courses that prepare school administrators should be more like this one:

I cannot emphasize enough that courses should be taught in this manner.

It is my belief that most of the graduate courses should be taught in this manner. I know this may be difficult to do, but thought should be given to it.

While we need to refine this course and the University must seek means to justify the added cost of such a course, our students stated clearly that these efforts will be essential to the improvement of our field. One student said it best:

I think this a valuable course to have in Ed. Admin. and hope it continues to be offered and that it is team taught. There is a cost factor, but there is also the idea that you should practice what you preach and with the restructuring movement which includes cooperative teaching, you have to be leaders.

A POTENT MEDIUM FOR ADMINISTRATOR DEVELOPMENT

We believe that the success of the course hinges on the ability to operationalize two premises: that administrators need to follow the learning cycle; and that administrators need to think constantly about their actions considering all three dimensions. By facing real situations in a simulated setting, we have enabled students to learn and practice these two helpful tools for acting and thinking as an administrator. The real situation gave them the vivid and dynamic flow of facts, ideas, deadlines, and interpersonal alliances and animosities within which they could try their own skills. The simulated setting and the structured reflection provided them the luxury of time to plan, the benefit of support in learning, and the advantage of taking risks without having to live with the consequences.

In educational administration, students are often taught theories and practices without opportunities to apply administrative theory to practice. The school simulation developed for this course requires this type of integration and application. This laboratory class marks a new approach to administrator preparation at the University of Maine, one that promises to give coursework the professional development dimension called for in state certification reform and in national initiatives for upgraded graduate training and study.

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ABOUT THE NATIONAL POLICY BOARD FOR EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

The National Policy Board for Educational Administration is representative of practitioners, faculty members, and policy makers in the field of educational administration who are committed to reform in their profession. The Board was officially formed on January 20, 1988.

The National Policy Board consists of representatives from the following ten member organizations:

- American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education
- American Association of School Administrators
- Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
- Association of School Business Officials
- Council of Chief State School Officers
- National Association of Elementary School Principals
- National Association of Secondary School Principals
- National Council of Professors of Educational Administration
- National School Boards Association
- University Council for Educational Administration

The Board's charter outlines three purposes:

- (1) To develop, disseminate, and implement professional models for the preparation of educational leaders;
- (2) To increase the recruitment and placement of women and minorities in positions of educational leadership; and
- (3) To establish a national certifying board for educational administrators.